

## The modernization of the Hawza? Lebanon as a case study

Article (Accepted Version)

Kassem, Ali (2018) The modernization of the Hawza? Lebanon as a case study. Contemporary Arab Affairs, 11 (4). pp. 83-110. ISSN 1755-0912

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/74854/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

The 'Modernization' of the Hawza?  
Lebanon as a Case Study

Ali Kassem  
School of Law, Politics and Sociology  
University of Sussex, UK

Abstract:

A Hawza is the establishment responsible for the training of Shia Islam's Imams, preachers, professors and researchers. Its educational model, for hundreds of years, has involved the teaching of *Fikh*, *Usul*, philosophy, *Quranic* Studies and Arabic language. Over the past few decades, the social sciences, the systematic study of man and society which had emerged in the 'west', have been slowly making their way into these institutions, alongside a number of other changes. This paper will investigate, qualitatively, the religious training of Shia men of religion in Lebanon to explore the changes taking place within this institution. Based on a triangulation of participant observation, interviews with professors, students and stakeholders as well as content analysis of certain course material the paper claims a Hawza in metamorphosis. While structural and material alterations have straightforwardly made their way into the institution, content and curricular ones have faced more difficulty. These changes, reveal plenty about Islamic education and Shia Islam in Lebanon's public sphere. Additionally, the paper raises questions and insights regarding both decolonial theory, Lebanon's future and the geopolitics of the Arab world.

Key words: Hawza, Shia Islam, Lebanon, Shia scholars, Islamic education.

## Introduction

Across religious traditions, the ‘criteria, process and outcomes of selecting, training and grooming future leaders’ is pivotal in the development of religion as both tradition and organization (Nesbitt 2007, 1).<sup>i</sup> In the Islamic world, there are several institutions responsible for the formation of religious scholars. For the Sunnis, a number of Madrassas, as well as academic universities and institutes, have long taken up the task. For the Shia, it is the Hawza. Graduates of these establishments take-up various roles within their communities: from mosque imams and preachers to teachers and researchers (Berkey 1992). Whatever their tasks, these graduates are, within religious communities, potent social agents engaging and contributing to the establishment of hegemonic discourses and the formation of social order. In a time where their rulings still hold ‘a greater legitimacy among the faithful than the civil laws passed by the state’ their belief systems remain central to the both the formation and the understanding of said social order (Sindawi 2007, 3). By consequence, the training of religious scholars, a form of power capable of manufacturing consent and begetting hegemony, presents itself as an issue of great value and relevance (Heywood 1994).<sup>ii</sup>

Lebanon, a small post-colonial multi-cultural Mediterranean country where no clear identity exists presents itself as a captivating case study to shed light on the training of Islam’s religious scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Further, the political power balance governing the nation makes it a rich landscape capable of suggesting plenty regarding the happenings in other parts of the Islamic world. This paper will be limited to the Shia institution (Hawza), looking at changes within. Primarily, the paper is interested in investigating whether the social sciences have made their way into the training of Shia scholars. Also, it will scratch the surface of a serious gap in the literature by shedding light on a number of different (changing) characteristics in the Hawza; from curricular structure to the material setting of classes. The paper will close with a brief discussion of the implications of its findings.

Up until the Islamic revolution in Iran, religiosity was not the norm in Lebanon, particularly for the Shia (Deeb 2005). Today, the situation is drastically different. Scholars of religion have played a central role in bringing forth this transition and,

naturally, any alteration to their training is bound to influence Lebanon's socio-political scene. Additionally, the investigation of the institution responsible for the formation of religion's scholars promises great insights into the Shia landscape as well as its relationship to Lebanon the state. More important, perhaps, are the insights which might be brought forth by this investigation to decolonial theory. As attempts to reclaim non-Eurocentric paradigms gain momentum, investigating non-western institutions promises plenty. While this is not the main research question of this paper, its findings will bring forth insights, observations and questions.

It should be noted here that this paper does not situate itself as an advocacy for the erasure of indigenous (here, Muslim and Shia) forms of knowledge in favour of those of the West and its modernity (here, the social sciences). This project is based on a dual assumption. The first is that the social sciences are not an exclusively western endeavour, as hard as Eurocentrism has tried to make it appear that way.<sup>iii</sup> The second is that, in a time of post-colonialism and continued imperialism, the social sciences, both in their western version and in alternative versions (if any) are essential for all public intellectuals across the globe. This is for a multitude of reasons, including the general knowledge/awareness, the heightened ability to understand and engage the social world and, most importantly, the critical thinking the social sciences have to offer their learner. Additionally, the project is tackling the inclusion of the social sciences alongside those fields of knowledge already present, not their replacement. Moreover, and even if one does not accept the above, debates on 'authenticity' and 'western influence' are not foreign to the Hawza and Muslim educational institutions. Rather, they are raging within these establishments under different forms and guises. This alone would justify such an inquiry.

Henceforth, I will begin by summarily touching on the history of Islamic religious seminaries. After a short discussion of methods, I turn to the Hawza and the fieldwork to elaborate on the data of this research. Next, I briefly present the analysis of interviews with thirteen stakeholders/gatekeepers of the Shia religious educational institution in Lebanon to situate the data found within a more holistic frame. I will then end with a few analytical insights.

## History

In terms of history, the birthplace of Islamic education was mosques, where subject-specific study circles appeared with Islam's appearance (Dodge 1962). Today, this is no longer the norm, and, for both Sunni and Shia, specialized educational institutions have acquired the role. The earliest documentation present, around the ninth and tenth centuries, describe mosques as Islam's focal educational establishment (Haskins 1965).

According to Mottahedeh (2006) education in Shia seminaries has, historically, had the following structure: every student begins with '*Muqadimat*' where Arabic language, logic, and theology are covered. After this period students move on to *Sutuh* where they learn a 'practical manual of law' issued by one of the renowned Shia *Marji* of their time, complementing them with a number of books of *Fikh*. Then, the students begin taking *Usul al-fikh*: (basis/origins of *Fikh*) which are the postulates upon which the formation of religious legal opinions is to stand. Arithmetic, as well as the discipline of '*transmission of hadith*', are also covered by this point. Additionally, Philosophy is given considerable time. Lastly, students enter a stage of *Bahth al-Kharij* where a specific topic is taken and opposing views, with arguments and counter-arguments, are systematically discussed by the study circle. The deliberations are usually heated, and the students are in the custom of trying to contradict the professor. This is based on the assumption that it is through attempting to refute the views of the professor that knowledge may be advanced, and it is here that emerging students establish scholarly worth, authority and legitimacy.

With a pedagogy based on intimate tutorship, the schools consisted of simple rings whereby students sat on the floor in a circle, the closer to the teacher the higher their scientific rank (Mervin 2003). No rigid curriculum existed and, throughout, the system was one where students unreservedly attend different lectures, where examinations and homework are non-existent and where course duration varies with the variation of professors/students in attendance. Overall, and funded by independent charitable trusts, Islamic education sought to graduate scholars capable of interpreting religious text, issuing religious rulings and assuming vital public roles (Makdisi 1981). Up until the nineteenth century, the model had undergone little to no change (Mottahedeh 2006).

For Shia Islam, the apex of scholarly achievement, which usually comes after no less than multiple decades of study, is reaching the level of *Marji'ya*; becoming a source of legal emulation for believers (Aziz 2001). It is only then, after a very rigorous and lengthy path, that a scholar gains the right to issue rulings and be 'followed' (Walbridge 2001). This must be preceded by *Ijtihad*, defined by Makdisi as being, 'literally, the exertion of one's efforts to the utmost limit' (Makdisi 1989, 3). Indeed, the *Marji'* may, simplistically, be understood as the most knowledgeable of those who have reached *Ijtihad*. Based on the above, it might be said that the Hawza, translated by scholars such as Sindawi (2007, 4) as 'the enclosure of learning', is the customary, independent and persisting institution of Shia religious higher education through which one enters the field of research to, slowly and with time, establish their *Ijtihad* and, sometimes, later, their *Marji'ya*.<sup>iv</sup>

## The Case and the Methods

While Lebanon would appear as a country on the margin of Islamic religious education today, with Qom, Iran and Najaf, Iraq occupying centre stage, this has not always been the case. To the contrary, and as is often retold by Shia scholars in Lebanon, the Hawza of *Jabal Amel* (a historic geographical area covering parts of the Lebanese South and parts of the Bekaa valley) was once the regional hub of education and religious training (Chalabi 2006; Hourani 1986). The self-proclaimed inheritors of this prestigious Hawza, scattered across Lebanese soil today, are the case being elaborated on in this paper. As qualitative research, it will seek to understand, interact and analyse happenings to make sense and transfer a story (Burawoy, 1998). Seeking an interpretive understanding of action, qualitative research was therefore applied to fathom the current state of affairs in the Hawza through the collection of data from its natural settings. This was pursued through a triangulation of participant observation, content analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Burawoy 1998; Rubin and Rubin 2011). Through this triangulation of methods, I attempted to look at the institution holistically, produce a richer analysis and not reduce people or processes (Flick 1992).

This study involved the investigation of six Hawzas, four of which are in the greater Beirut region, one in the Bekaa and one in the South. These included the three largest

Hawzas of the country (Al-Rasoul Al-Akram/Al-Mustafa International University, Al-Maahad Al-Sharii and Baqiyatollah) and three of the smaller ones (Al-Baker, Al-Montazar and Imam Ali). The three large Hawzas chosen were the ones sponsored, funded or overseen by a major Shia religious figure (be it in Lebanon or in the region). The smaller Hawzas were chosen based on responsiveness and availability. In addition to the practical impossibility of investigating all Hawzas, the majority of small Hawzas are marginal personal enterprises with little impact.<sup>v</sup> The fieldwork was conducted between 2015 and 2016, spanning around fifteen months in total. While registered as a student and attending classes at Lebanon's major Hawza (Al-Rasoul Hawza), data collection was pursued at all six institutions.

Theoretically speaking, the same process was to be adopted at all the institutions, with the exception of participant observation as a student. Practically speaking, data collection at some Hawzas was aborted early on, while at others some elements had to be conceded. The approach was as follows: I began with the collection of the curriculum maps for all years of study. After this was done, I looked for the courses that had the potential of containing a social science component, such as history, or ones that were outright social science subjects such as sociology, psychology, political science and the like. After having identified the courses of relevance, the syllabus/outline/description was retrieved from the administration, and the professor of the course was contacted for an interview. For each of these courses, the interview with the professor was followed by procurement of the textbook or material being given to students. In the case where there was no textbook and no material, I sought out lecture notes. In the case where such notes were not available, I looked at the reference books specified by the instructor or the syllabus. Naturally, full content analysis was only possible in the case where there was a clear textbook/material. Lastly, interviews with deans, professors, students and stakeholders were conducted.<sup>vi</sup> Interviews were often conducted at the Hawzas, particularly those with students and professors. These multiple visits allowed me to make the more general observations I include in what follows.

Before proceeding, a few notes on methodology must to be mentioned. First, all the methods used are non-obtrusive minimum-harm methods seeking to assess an institution



in dynamism. Participant confidentiality and voluntary participation were central tenets of the fieldwork. Whenever names are mentioned in this paper it is with the permission of the participant in question. On another hand, in terms of positionality, I am myself a Shiite born and raised a few blocks away from the main Hawza I spent over one year and a half attending as a participant observer. Indeed, the understanding I had at the beginning of this research, regarding the social role of religious scholars and their interaction with the Lebanese Shia community, was essential in directing the research and assuring representativeness just as it was essential in allowing communication and establishing trust. Nevertheless, this affiliation may, on the other hand, jeopardize objectivity. Conscious of such a bias, I took much care to preserve reflexivity throughout the research process, from reporting to analysis (Burawoy 1998; Ahern 1999). Nevertheless, I do not claim objectivity nor pure induction, but merely the simple reflection of perceived social realities.

A summary of the fieldwork is presented in table 1 below:

|                              | Interviews             |         |          | Participant observation | Content analysis       |                  |
|------------------------------|------------------------|---------|----------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
|                              | Admi<br>nistrat<br>ion | Faculty | Students |                         | Textbooks/<br>Handouts | Student<br>notes |
| 1. Hawza Al-Rasoul           | 3                      | 5       | 20       | Yes                     | Six                    | Two              |
| 2. Hawza Al-Maahad Al-Sharii | 3                      | 3       | 7        | None                    | Four                   | None             |
| 3. Imam Ali Hawza            | 1                      | 1       | 8        | None                    | None                   | None             |
| 4. Hawza Al-Baker            | 1                      | 0       | 11       | None                    | None                   | None             |
| 5. Hawza Baqiyatollah        | 1                      | 1       | 13       | None                    | None                   | None             |

|                      |   |   |   |      |      |      |
|----------------------|---|---|---|------|------|------|
| 6. Hawza Al-Montazar | 1 | 0 | 7 | None | None | None |
|----------------------|---|---|---|------|------|------|

Table 1: Summary of fieldwork.

## The Hawza

In Lebanon, up till the second half of the twentieth century, the Hawza coded student progress in terms of textbooks and subjects. The time allocated to a given subject/textbook could hence significantly vary, to fit both students and professors. No examinations were held, and most institutions did not require any academic qualifications for entry, beyond literacy, with students often joining between the ages of nine and fourteen. A large number of those joining, although not all, came from renowned Shia families, and the track was seen as a challenging one. The objective of this training was uniform: producing *Mujtahids*. Further, at least in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, no complete Hawza education was available in Lebanon: after a certain time (which varied across the years) students were expected to travel (mostly to Najaf, Iraq) to complete their religious education. In the 1990s this trend began to shift.<sup>vii</sup>

Perhaps the most significant change is in terms of objective: what is the education offered at the Hawza and what does it seek? A few decades ago, the question was straightforward: jurisprudential and philosophical training. How far back the trend of strict specialization goes is contested, but many of my participants claimed that it emerged during the First World War, not before. Yet, no such clear answer is available today. In any case, the most important factor behind the current alterations has been, also according to many of my participants, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran where, in Qom 2016, the Hawza offers over 160 different fields of concentration, including various social and human fields of knowledge. This, like many other changes in the Islamic republic, has rippled in Lebanon.

In 2016 Lebanon, Hawzas function under the ‘Board of matters of the Hawza *Ilmiya* in Lebanon’. This board, established as a cooperation between the various factions of Lebanese Shiism,<sup>viii</sup> has elaborated a vision of the Hawza and specific guidelines to govern institutes, directors and students. The board has accredited twenty-two Hawzas in

the country, distributed geographically as follows: Two in the Bekaa region<sup>ix</sup>, twelve in the greater Beirut region and eight in the south. No Hawza charges any tuition fees, to the contrary, they all reimburse their students.<sup>x</sup> All the ones with dormitories offer free accommodation to all their students (based on availability).

In relation to the primary research question of this paper (the introduction of new fields of knowledge and the weight given to such fields in the training of scholars-to-be), the six Hawzas investigated may be classified into two categories: an established and an emerging model. Al-Rasoul Al-Akram/Al-Mustafa International University, Al-Maahad Al-Sharii and Al-Baker Hawza are emerging model Hawzas while Baqiyatollah, Al-Montazar and Imam Ali Hawzas are ones following the established model. It is to this classification that I will now turn.<sup>xi</sup>

### The Emerging Model

In what follows, I elaborate on each of the three Hawzas under this label. Before proceeding, a few points need to be made. The first is that this labelling, like any labelling, is simplistic. Naturally, the Hawzas discussed vastly vary. Yet, it is useful, especially regarding the research question of this paper. Second, it must also be mentioned that what is presented here is based on an in-depth systematic analysis. Due to the limitations of space, such an analysis could not be elaborated on. Lastly, while a comparative structure has been adopted in presenting ideas, it is lacking at many instances; mostly because of differences in the nature of the institutions, but also sometimes because of the lack of data.

### Al-Rasoul Hawza

Al-Rasoul Hawza is the largest Hawza in Lebanon, and the main site of investigation for this research. It is considered as the most prestigious for a number of reasons: from its history to its sources of funding. More importantly, its teachers are the grand public religious intellectuals of the Shia religious community. Additionally, it often boasts fellows from the Qom seminary as visiting professors. It is located in the southern suburb of Beirut and is spread out over multiple buildings. Its student body is of around 300 males, with over 150 of them living in Hawza dormitories. As of 2016, a large complex is

under construction to which the Hawza is expected to move within the few coming years. The Hawza offers tracks for both males and females, with some differences in curricula.<sup>xii</sup>

The Hawza was established in 1983 by a group of scholars, whose names are unclear today, and has been growing, under the patronage of the Islamic republic in Iran, ever since. This has had its huge influence on the Hawza, manifested in its architecture and Persian-style courtyard. The Hawza identifies the *Marji'ya* of Sayyed Ali Khamenei and the compliance with its views as its overarching tenet. Since its inception, it has always been headed by an Iranian scholar.

The Hawza houses a significant Library, in comparison to other Hawzas and institutions of higher learning in Lebanon (including academic universities). Within this library, there is a section dedicated to the social sciences and social thought. This includes books on sociology, psychology, political science as well as a number of other related fields. Books covering western thought and works by European and American intellectuals/scholars were also found.

In term of program, it has a structured program running over eight years, significantly less than the norm of ten to twelve years. Its teaching days are Monday to Friday and it observes a three-month summer vacation, again in breach of the old model where education was year-round, and the weekly holiday was Friday. Yet, the Hawza does not observe official Lebanese holidays. Its classes begin early on, at 6:50 am, generally ending at around 11:30 am. Lessons are no longer held in rings or on cushions, but rather in a western-academic-style classroom with chairs, desks and boards. All the courses offered are mandatory for all students, there are no electives and no choice of classes, again in stark contradiction with the established Hawza model where the Hawza had multiple professors teaching the same classes and where students chose the class they preferred, with no conditions/constraints.

In terms of admission requirements, the Hawza does not admit students who have not acquired the Lebanese Baccalaureate or an equivalent academic degree entitling university-level entry. Further, Al-Rasoul is known for its cooperation with the International Mustafa University based in Qom. Over the past few years, it has practically transitioned into a branch of the International University, keeping both names. As of

2017, it has not been accredited by the Lebanese Ministry of Higher education as a university. Due to this fact, it continues its agreements of cooperation with the Islamic University of Lebanon, entitling its student a degree in 'Islamic Studies' from the Islamic University of Lebanon after four years of study in the Hawza. Al-Rasoul divides its program into three phases. The first of these is the equivalent of a bachelor's degree, the second the equivalent of a master's degree and the third the equivalent of a PhD. *Bahth al-kharij* may be seen as a sort of post-doc training.

In the second and third stages, the student's education is limited to a number of *Usul* and philosophy classes; the Hawza student's real 'specialty'. No social sciences classes are taken during these phases; the 'general' courses are given during the first four years of a student's training. The organization of study at the Hawza begins with a BA phase which is four to four and a half years long, followed by an MA phase, which is two to three years long. Once completed, the MA students may pursue a PhD which normally takes three to five years of study. Currently, two MA tracks are available in Lebanon: the 'MA in Islamic *Fikh* and bases' and the 'MA in Quranic explanation and sciences' (Introduced in 2015).

In what follows I elaborate on the current curriculum being offered by the Hawza. It ought to be noted that this is not an analysis of the theoretical curriculum found in the Hawza guidebook. This distinction is important as there are substantial differences between the curriculum in the guidebook and the curriculum on offer. The major variance is the fact that there are four social science subjects stated as part of the curriculum, but which are not offered by the Hawza, and have not been offered for over eight years. These are the courses on sociology, introduction to psychology, educational psychology and child developmental psychology. Additionally, classes on computer literacy, modes of preaching and foreign languages all figure in the curriculum but are not offered by the Hawza. Inquiring, I discovered that these courses were on offer for a number of years starting in the early 2000s, were then cancelled, then reinstated and then, around 2010, cancelled again.

The subjects are organized in terms of credits with each course being around four months long, equivalent to a one-semester course in academic universities. The six subjects receiving most weight and credits are, in decreasing order, listed below:<sup>xiii</sup>

- 1- *Fikh* and *Usul*
- 2- Arabic Language<sup>xiv</sup>
- 3- Quranic studies
- 4- Islamic doctrine
- 5- History
- 6- Philosophy

None of these courses are directly related to the social sciences, except for history. This class was investigated (content analysis of material as well as interview with instructor), in addition to the three other classes on offer and of relevance. These are the courses ‘critique of western social thought’, ‘the political thought of imam Khomeini’ and ‘research methods’. The content analysis of the material offered in these courses revealed three trends: very weak engagement with western academia, theory as the only issue of concern and the restriction of legitimate knowledge to textual one. These trends were confirmed through the interviews with the professors teaching these courses.

Moreover, the interviews with the five professors teaching the topics of relevance revealed the thin line they were treading. All the professors agreed as to the need for change and amelioration in the Hawza curriculum. At the same time, all five professors expressed suspicion as to the validity of ‘western knowledge’, stating a need to approach these sciences critically rather than as givens. The professors seemed encouraged to engage the west, refusing to accept its knowledge as a given and wary of how exposure to it might influence the students. Four out of the five had academic training (the professor teaching history did not). One of them was trained in the social sciences, one in philosophy and two in Islamic studies. Additionally, all professors stressed that a holistic education does not need to contradict a solid specialist training, but that this is difficult to achieve in practice.

In parallel, twenty students from the Hawza were interviewed. There was unanimous agreement as to the need for the inclusion of the social sciences within their training. The

students generally expressed satisfaction with their training but also stated that the Hawza is an establishment in need of reform. Echoes of the calls of Sayyed Ali Khamenei were particularly significant as many students referred to him to legitimize their claim for ‘change and progress’. Nevertheless, most students did not see conducting fieldwork as something a man of religion can/should do. Somewhere, it also appeared that the students placed great emphasis on academic specialty and asserted that ‘sheikhs are not experts in everything, they should not be in charge of everything’.<sup>xv</sup> This was accompanied with the feeling that different Sheikhs ought to be experts in different fields. The majority of these students are jointly registered at an academic university, mainly the Islamic University of Lebanon or Al-Maaref University.<sup>xvi</sup>

#### Al-Maahad Al-Sharii

Al-Maahad Al-Sharii is a significantly large Hawza, with around 200 students, located in Beirut’s southern Suburb. It is part of a large complex affiliated with the institutions of Sayyed Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah, such as a television station and a radio station. The Hawza itself is composed of multiple buildings, including gardens and a library. The Hawza was established in 1983 by Sayyed Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah. Its board of directors was at the time of investigation, as it had always been, formed of both Lebanese and Arab scholars.

The Hawza’s Library is not a large one, encompassing around 3500 books, according to the Hawza administration. Its main themes are those of *Hadith*, *Fikh* and *Quran*. Nevertheless, one can locate sections designated for psychology, political sciences and contemporary issues/sociology.

The academic year is structured along the lines of western academic universities. The Hawza runs its classes early in the morning, starting at around 7 am and ending at around 11 am. It encompasses a dormitory and runs its programs for both males and females, segregated. It has abandoned cushions to adopt chairs, desks and whiteboards.

Its official curriculum runs for nine years, after which the student begins the *Bahth al-Kharij* stage. Throughout these nine years, a total of 115 courses are offered, with varying weights. Each course is around four months long, equivalent to a one-semester

course in academic universities. The six subjects receiving most weight, in decreasing order, are listed below:

1. *Fikh* and *Usul*
2. Arabic Language
3. Philosophy
4. Islamic Doctrine
5. Quranic Studies
6. Logic

Of these courses, four may be classified as social sciences.<sup>xvii</sup> Together, these make up eighty credit hours out of around 5100 credit hours (1.56% of total credit hours offered). The courses titled ‘methods of thinking’, ‘scientific research’ and ‘world religions’ were investigated in-depth. These revealed attempts to widen the scope of knowledge the students receive through offering them information on different cultures, religions and civilizations. It also revealed the weak engagement with academia, the fact that textual knowledge is held supreme and the fact that these courses are considered as ‘second class/service courses’ by the establishment.

In addition to the above, the Hawza administration stated that it has two weekly recurring events: a general discussion every Wednesday and a gathering every Thursday where a selected student gives a speech. The purpose of these is, according to the administration, to get students to improve their social and presentation skills. Particularly of interest, the general discussion takes up (weekly) a different topic for discussion. There is no pre-assigned list of topics, but issues in contemporary thought and social theory have often been debated, according to the institution’s academic director.

Seven students from Al-Maahad Al-Sharii were interviewed. All interviewees stated that the Hawza must introduce its students to the social sciences. Three students expressed their dissatisfaction with the way the Hawza has been introducing ‘non-traditional’ fields of knowledge into its curriculum. They claimed that this has been done with little planning and organization, making it quite cumbersome for the students, as well as inefficient. Most students were registered at academic universities. Most of them also



asserted they were seeking to become ‘specialists’, perceiving their academic degree as a supplement.

Additionally, three professors were interviewed from Al-Maahad Al-Sharii. Al-Maahad seemed to have a very heterogeneous faculty: with some professors holding PhD degrees (including one with a PhD from a British university) and others not having had a high school education. Despite this, all three lecturers interviewed asserted the need for change within the establishment and the need for the introduction of the social sciences into the curriculum. Two of them had reservations as to the introduction of fieldwork or social research methods, explaining that this was not the role of a religious scholar. These two professors also expressed their fear of the Hawza becoming a place too loose where what once was a solid training turns into a boneless ‘general culture’ one. This was accompanied with the assertion that people already see the scholar as someone who is expected to know about everything, while this should not be the case. Interestingly, one of them lamented how he had recently received a call from a woman asking for ‘marital advice’ saying that she ‘should be seeing a psychiatrist or a marriage counsellor, not a sheikh’.

#### Al-Baker Hawza

While Hawzas such as that of Al-Rasoul are spread over a complex of over six buildings, and growing, smaller Hawzas such as Al-Baker are limited to single apartments in residential buildings. In the case of Al-Baker, this is an apartment with no more than six rooms, located in the Rweis region, in Beirut’s southern suburb. The Hawza’s entire student body does not exceed the forty students benchmark, spread over two schedules: one in the morning (6:30 am to 10:30 am) and one in the afternoon (4 pm to 7 pm).

The Hawza was established in 1999 by a group of independent scholars. In terms of admissions requirements, the Hawza does not admit students without an official degree equivalent to the Lebanese baccalaureate entitling university-level entry. Its teaching days are Monday to Friday. It observes a three-month summer vacation and does not observe official Lebanese holidays.

Al-Baker, for a number of practical reasons, is currently not offering classes beyond the fifth year of study. While it holds many features in common with the emerging model,

especially in terms of the inclusion of new fields of knowledge, it has preserved some features of the established model. For example, it uses the mainstream classification of 'stages', unlike the larger Hawzas where the terms of the academy have been adopted. It also has some classes where students still sit on mattresses, in rings.

Over around seven years of study (theoretically speaking), students undergo a program which is somewhat divided into seven study cycles. The Hawza measures the progress of its students in terms of books and there is no rigidly set time for the achievement of any single book. The topics covered are the same as in any Hawza, from Arabic language, to *Fikh* and *Usul*, logic, Islamic doctrine, Quranic studies and philosophy. Nevertheless, some textbooks covered in the Hawzas following the established model are left-out here. Due to the absence of any accurate and clear curriculum map, especially since the Hawza is 'constantly mutating, changing and adapting' both adding and removing subjects (in the words of its director), a numerical analysis of the courses offered was impossible. Nevertheless, it may be confidently said that the six subjects receiving most weight, in decreasing order, are listed below:

1. *Fikh* and *Usul*
2. Arabic Language
3. Logic
4. Philosophy
5. Quranic Studies
6. History

On another hand, the Hawza's published curriculum-map states many courses related to the social sciences (principles of sociology, principles of psychology, principles of Islamic economics, principles of Islamic education, introduction to Law, theory of knowledge and teachings methods). Currently, and for more than five years now, none of these courses has been offered. The Hawza administration said that it has recently introduced a program by which the contents of these courses, complemented by other subjects which may be classified as 'general requirements' in academic terms, have been shaped into workshops to be given to students, distributed over the years of study. The Hawza was not cooperative in providing references or material for these workshops.

Eight students of Al-Baker Hawza were interviewed for this research, covering the various levels of study. The students were not very satisfied with their experience at the Hawza and were found to be attending it because they thought it was less demanding than other Hawzas; it worked well with their other commitments. The students were asked if the Hawza offers them any training in the social sciences and if they think the social sciences are essential to their formation. All interviewees said that there are no subjects in the social sciences on offer. All students also expressed that they would have 'liked to learn' about the social sciences in the Hawza as they deem the topics 'important' for their formation.

No professors except the director could be reached for an interview. The director, himself also a teacher and a graduate of the Qom Hawza, expressed his belief in the need for change and reform. Adamant that the old model is not fit for 'our current times' he lamented the difficulty of changing habits and tradition. According to the students, the majority of their professors hold university degrees and believe in the need for a higher interaction between the academy and the Hawza. These claims could not be further examined.

### Synthesis

In terms of courses, the emergent model Hawzas offer a variety of courses, changing weights as a student progresses. The central subject in these establishments are *Fikh* and *Usul*, language and Doctrine/Philosophy. These Hawzas have generally drifted away from the longstanding Hawza model with the introduction (or attempts at the introduction) of a number of fields of knowledge, such as theory of knowledge or introductions to the social sciences, just as they have changed the weight offered to some fields, such as ethics/*Irfan* and history. All three Hawzas have chosen to shorten the length of study, with the largest two having chosen to take up the academic model of set years, semesters and credits. This has often been accompanied with structural and physical changes, of different sorts.

Within these Hawzas, engagement with academia is weak while efforts are being done to promote a research approach to knowledge and learning. Courses other than *Fikh*, *Usul* and their affiliates are considered as 'second/service level' courses by the establishment

and they are treated as thus by students and professors. Yet, a calling for change is powerful, and the social sciences are perceived as central to this (still) expected change. While it might never happen in the way it is planned, it has already begun changing the way professors and students perceive their establishment.

Indeed, in terms of students, the students of these Hawzas all agreed on the need for change and the need to link the social sciences with the 'religious' ones. Students sought to become specialists, often of religious jurisprudence. Yet, even when this was their purpose, they expressed that social sciences should figure in their training.

As to professors, it was clear that there is no homogenous identity for the Hawza lecturer, particularly across subjects. Further, many professors saw the definition of a Hawza as the establishment which should be graduating *Mujtahids*, and, based on that, the fields of knowledge it introduces are to be the fields which would serve this purpose. For many of the interviewed professors, the social sciences did serve that purpose. Also, even for those who did not take such a stance, the inclusion of the social sciences was rarely shunned. The professors appreciated academia and asserted the need to connect the Hawza to the 'western academy'. Nevertheless, they also expressed deep suspicion of 'western' sciences and warned that they cannot be taken and projected onto Islam and Islamic societies as is; a call to 'humanize the social sciences' emanated throughout. Finally, they were clear about the social role of the scholar: a social agent with a specific sphere of action rather than a leader whose authority covers all aspects of society.

### The Established Model

In what follows, those Hawzas classified under the second model will be discussed. Due to constraints of geography, availability, time and resources, professors were interviewed at only one of these Hawzas (the largest one, Baqiyatollah). At the other two, interviews were limited to students, the general/academic director and some administrative staff. All these Hawzas do not charge any tuition fees, with their students receiving monthly remuneration.

## Imam Ali Hawza

Imam Ali Hawza is said to be the most conservative Hawza in the nation. The Hawza is composed of a building located near the Iranian Embassy, although it is not affiliated with the embassy. It houses a significant library and a dormitory, where most of its students reside, including students whose original place of residence is nearby (such as in Beirut's southern suburb). This is meant to create a certain 'safe environment of learning'<sup>xviii</sup> where the student only focuses on acquisition of knowledge, away from mundane life's distractions. It houses a significant library, mainly focused on issues of Islamic studies and lacking in coverage on the social sciences.

The Hawza was established around the year 2000 by Sayyed Jaafar Mortada, a renowned Lebanese scholar, upon his return from Qom, Iran. It currently has around fifty-five students and over twenty-five professors. All students receive a monthly stipend. Besides the fact its teaching days are Monday to Friday and the usage of chairs and desks, it appears to share nothing with the westernized university model. There is no two-term division, and the summer vacation is much shorter than that of the westernized university model of two/three months. Also, the Hawza does not identify a sharp or determined set of years or semesters over which the curriculum must end. Normally, the Hawza requires around eleven or twelve years before a student can begin the *Bahth al-Kharij* stage. It follows the structure of *Muqadimat*, *lower Sutuh*, *upper Sutuh* and *Bahth al-Kahrij*. The Hawza runs its classes early in the morning, starting at 6:30 am and ending at around 10 am. The Hawza does not offer its program for females and places huge emphasis on full-time status (*tafarogh*, literally meaning to empty oneself from any other commitments). Additionally, the Hawza obliges its students to present weekly written reports on every class they attend, in addition to regularly monitoring the student's notes. These reports must include what the professor had presented in addition to an in-depth discussion, including reference to multiple other sources.

As the Hawza does not officially follow the academic model of credits, comparison based on credit distribution is not possible. Overall, the *Muqadimat* phase at the Hawza is given in around four years, followed by around seven years for both *Sutuh* put together. Based on the Hawza's curriculum, it covers a little over thirty textbooks. The time it takes to

cover each of these books is not predetermined or constrained.<sup>xix</sup> The five<sup>xx</sup> subjects receiving most weight, in decreasing order, are listed below:

- 1- *Fikh* and *Usul*
- 2- Islamic doctrine
- 3- Arabic language
- 4- Philosophy
- 5- Logic

Imam Ali Hawza does not offer any courses which may be classified as social sciences.

Seven students from the Hawza were interviewed. All seven agreed to the statement that 'Islamic scholars must be aware of, learn and engage with the social sciences'. Whether such a duty is the responsibility of the Hawza or not was not agreed upon, with two students stating that it is not. They all agreed that the Hawza was not offering them anything in terms of the social sciences, nor in terms of an engagement with academia.

#### Baqiyatollah Hawza

Baqiyatollah Hawza is the major Hawza of the Lebanese south. The Hawza is composed of multiple buildings over a significantly large piece of land located on the edges of the southern village of Toul. With multiple dormitories, most of its students live on campus. The Hawza has three libraries, with huge collections of books on issues of *Fikh*, *Hadith*, *Quranic* studies and philosophy. The social sciences are not completely absent from the libraries, but their presence is meagre.

The Hawza was established in 2006 by several scholars who had just returned from Qom. The study year is not officially structured along the lines of western academic universities, but it is practically so: a two-semester model, with a summer vacation, is followed. Progression is structured around *Muqadimat*, *Sutuh* and *Bahth al-Kahrij*. The Hawza runs its classes early in the morning, starting at 7 am. Classes end at around noon, only running for males. The Hawza reimburses all its full-time students. It has abandoned the model of mattresses in favour of chairs, desks and boards.

In terms of admission requirements, the Hawza requires its students to have reached, but not necessarily finished, the High School level or its equivalent (approximately nine

years of study). Its curriculum runs for nine years, after which the student begins the *Bahth al-Kharij* stage. As the Hawza does not officially follow the academic model of credits, comparison based on credit distribution is not possible. Overall, the *Muqadimat* phase at the Hawza is given around three to four years, followed by three to four years for primary *Sutuh* and four to five years for secondary *Sutuh*. Based on the Hawzas' curriculum, it offers sixty-three subjects, with varying weights (time, number of textbooks to be covered, relationship to other subjects...), over the nine years of study. Each course is around four months long, roughly equivalent to a one-semester course in academic universities. The six subjects receiving most weight, in decreasing order, are listed below:

1. *Fikh* and *Usul*
2. Arabic language
3. Ethics
4. Quranic studies
5. Islamic doctrine
6. Philosophy

Baqiyatollah Hawza does not offer any courses which may be classified as social sciences.

Three professors from Baqiyatollah were interviewed regarding the changes taking place. As to non-curricular changes, all three considered what had taken place as something completely normal; natural. As to curricular changes, they all endorsed the changes occurring in Qom, Iran although they stressed the need for the Hawza not to lose its identity. No answer as to why Baqiyatollah had not introduced any changes could be obtained, with excuses ranging from 'circumstances' to the need for more time. They did not see the social sciences as an element of the production of someone who is only a *Mujtahid*, but rather as an element of the production of a preacher/orator who deals with people: a scholar with a public role. According to the interviewees, the more social sciences are included the more 'public' the expected role becomes. In that light, they spoke of a proposition to open a parallel track, where training aims at the production of a preacher and where the social sciences would be a main and central element. According

to the interviewees, the Hawza is in the process of updating its curriculum to include new fields of knowledge.

Eleven students from the seminary were asked as to whether the Hawza offers them any training in the social sciences and as to whether they think the social sciences are essential to their formation. All 11 stated that the Hawza does not offer any such training. Five students said that a slight element of the social sciences could be found in the ethics class and three said that such elements could be found in the history class, although indirectly. Nine of the 11 students said that the Hawza should cover such topics, while two said that the Hawza should not, as doing so will shift it off-course. For these students, such topics should be covered through individual readings, which the Hawza could play a supervisory role in. For them, this should not become a matter of courses and classes. It was also noteworthy that three students referred to the speeches of Sayyed Ali Khamenei to criticize their lack at their Hawza and to justify why such knowledge is to be taught at the Hawza (a sort of legitimization). Nine students were registered in academic universities, mostly in Islamic studies or other humanities courses at the Islamic University of Lebanon.

#### [Al-Imam Al-Montazar Hawza](#)

Al-Imam Al-Montazar Hawza is the most renowned Hawza in the Bekaa region, and one of the most prominent in Lebanon. The current head of Hezbollah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, is a graduate of Al-Montazar Hawza; a fact the Hawza prides itself on. It is located in the city of Baalbek, composed of multiple buildings with a large campus surrounded by natural greenery. Its student body is composed of around 100 learners with a faculty of around fifteen professors. Its general director was Sayyed Abbas Al-Moussawi (previous Hezbollah secretary general) in the early days of the Islamic resistance's rise. Currently, it is headed by sheikh Mohamad Yazbeck, the head of Hezbollah's Sharia council.

Its program runs anywhere between eight and twelve years, making it slightly longer than most Hawzas in Beirut. Its teaching days are Monday to Friday and it observes a three-month summer vacation. It runs its classes, like all the other Hawzas investigated, early



in the morning. It has abandoned the model of mattresses in favour of chairs, desks and boards.

In terms of admission requirements, the Hawza does not admit students who have not reached the secondary level of education (approximately no less than nine years of schooling). Al-Montazar has a ‘cooperation’ with the International Mustafa University based in Qom. It has not, nevertheless, transitioned into becoming a branch of Al-Mustafa University the way Al-Rasoul has. At the time of writing this paper, it offered two tracks: its own and that of Al-Mustafa University. Students are free to choose which track they wish to take. As the Al-Mustafa university track (which is theoretically identical to the one found at Al-Rasoul) is new, and as most students were not registered in it (no precise numbers could be obtained), the original Al-Montazar track is the one I will look at here.

For this track, there are no social sciences, no research methods, and no techniques of writing scientific research. Indeed, there is no focus besides *Fikh* and *Usul* and their associate fields. The six subjects receiving most weight, in decreasing order, are listed below:

1. *Fikh* and *Usul*
2. Arabic language
3. Islamic doctrine
4. Logic and Philosophy
5. History
6. Ethics

Seven students from Al-Montazar Hawza were interviewed. All seven of them stated that Hawza students need to learn the ‘social sciences’ with five stating that it is an ‘obligation’. They all agreed that the Hawza was currently not offering them anything in terms of these sciences or in terms of engaging academia. Four of them were registered at academic universities, all seeing it as a supplement to their ‘true’ study path.

## Synthesis

The established-model Hawzas are understood as being those establishments where the relationship with academia and with the social sciences is weak to non-existent and where the institution is making no substantial practical effort in the direction of change. Their course offering is limited to core training in jurisprudence and subjects falling, strictly, under the label of Islamic sciences. Their programs are longer, as they see shortening them as a loss and a compromise. Their student body is smaller, as are their classes, and it is possible that they are attracting less and less students with time. They all place great weight on students living in Hawza dormitories, seeking to immerse the students in the Hawza scholarly milieu. The structure of their training is very weakly influenced by the academic western model, but none of them has kept the ‘study-circle on mattresses’ format.

While a few of the interviewed professors and administration members were clear in that the social sciences cannot have a central position in the Hawza, this was certainly not the majority view. Many nuances exist, and it appears that the views of faculty members were not a reflection of the extant curricula. The apologetic tone found in the emerging model Hawzas, although weaker here, was also found. Yet, many at these Hawzas (particularly administration members presented in the section on stakeholders below) stressed that the Hawza has a clear model it should not abandon, especially as this model has ‘proven successful’.

Even though students at these Hawza felt the need for change, they were unclear as to how this should be done. When expressing such opinions, the students seemed confident and at ease; they were not worried about the fact they were disagreeing with the administration of their establishment. It is possible that the work being done in Qom, Iran and the recession of the Najaf establishment (the hub of the conservative discourse) has granted much legitimacy to the call for change.<sup>xxi</sup> Nevertheless, many of these students exhibited scepticism as to the inclusion of the social sciences within curricula, with many perceiving them as something a student acquires through personal work, such as readings. Most students were jointly registered at a university but saw their occupation as that of,

strictly, *Talib Ilm* (Seeker of knowledge). In this sense, the university was perceived as a supplement to the Hawza.

## Stakeholders

The administrative board members of Hawzas in Lebanon, alongside the lead faculty members, are understood as being the interpreters, gatekeepers, disseminators and guardians of the Shia educational institution in Lebanon.<sup>xxii</sup> They are therefore identified as the stakeholders of the Shia religious education in Lebanon. Based on renown, and restricted by availability, I solicited interviews from these stakeholders. Fifteen were contacted, and thirteen were interviewed. Based on a synthesis of these interviews, a few points of relevance are mentioned here. Regarding the background of stakeholders, most of them have received an academic training. Out of thirteen stakeholders, nine have an academic training with seven having academic PhDs.

On another note, interviewed stakeholders do not consider the ‘west’ as being an ‘other’ with a different epistemology. For them, the social sciences are based on ‘rational reason’ and, on that basis, they may, and should, be included in the training of future scholars. Acknowledging that the social sciences have a problematic genealogy, the fact that they are based on reason/rationality (an element they perceived as foundational to the Shia Islamic belief system), rendered this a surmountable handicap. Hence, there were claims that these sciences need to be ‘humanized’ as they are too imbedded in the west’s ‘history and culture’ and mixed with its ‘problematic beliefs and politics’. They are not to be rejected. They all expressed an epistemological divide separating the ‘hard sciences’ and the ‘social sciences’. The hard sciences give facts, and they are off-hands for the Hawzas. The ‘social sciences’ give ‘viewpoint’ and they are within the Hawza’s intellectual realm. Yet, this was not unanimously agreed upon and the claim that the ‘social sciences’ also give ‘facts’ existed. None of those interviewed expressed the view that both ‘sciences’ do not give ‘facts’. Referring to the current state within the Hawza, there was an apologetic tone whereby the lack of the social sciences in curricula is justified by referring to circumstances and the need for time. It was claimed that these sciences will slowly make their way as the ‘old guard diminish in influence and the Qom-led current strengthens’.

The sense that change is ahead, led by Iran, under the patronage of its supreme leader, was unanimous: it was found amongst the stakeholders affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran just as it was found amongst the stakeholders affiliated with the Najaf Hawza, with Sayyed Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah or with other factions of Lebanese Shiism. Overall, out of thirteen stakeholders, eleven insisted on the need for curricula changes and endorsed the current changes taking place. The two others stated that change is necessary but disagreed with the way it is currently being done. Their main objection was regarding the ‘blind inclusion of the social sciences’ and the increasing fragmentation within the institution.<sup>xxiv</sup> The participants also expressed an appreciation of academic study and its role in shaping scholars of Islam just as they expressed an affirmation of the value of specialization, both in terms of training as well as in terms of occupation. This came with the refusal of the notion that a sheikh is someone people should refer to in all matters.

Overall, despite this kaleidoscope, there was general agreement as to the value of increasing student’s engagement with their social reality. Further, there was undisputed agreement as to the need to better the state of research within Hawzas. This included an inclination toward the production of grounded knowledge, using, perhaps amongst others, some research methods of the social sciences.

## Implications

While what has been presented brings forth multiple insights to our understanding of Islamic education, its implications resonate far beyond the classroom. In this section, I will elaborate on three main axes, covering both the theoretical and the lived. Yet, before doing so, a brief note is in order. Today, Lebanon is a dysfunctional country with a weak state exercising feeble governance. Certainly, this is the result of decades of colonialism and neo-Imperialism laying the ground and rendering the present reality possible.

Historically, I am referring to the French having built the Lebanese state on corruption, dysfunctional apparatuses and confessional fragmentation, all forged under French paternalism. More recently, I am referring to the regional and global power struggles which unfold and reverberate in the country. In this sense, the intersection of these factors is what allows the field of the Hawza to proliferate, multiply and branch out into the

multiplicity described in this paper. In other words, the Hawza scene in Lebanon is only possible as a result of the failure of the Lebanese state, of its various weaknesses, absences and lacks. Had it not been so, the educational sector would have been regulated, structured and oriented.

The first of the three point I wish to make in this section is one of a theoretical nature. Over the past years, the question of indigenous forms of knowledge, and the resistance against western epistemic hegemony, has been receiving increased scholarly attention. Indeed, multiple academic traditions now disown modernity and its project, from Greek rationality to its conception of history (Mignolo 2011). Yet, it appears that Shia scholars take no such stance. For my interviewees, their indigenous knowledge is not situated in a paradigm inherently distinct from that of modernity's project. Rather, it is a modified version of it. This conclusion does not only build on the fact that efforts are being made to include 'western' sciences: it is equally based on the nature of those subjects which constitute the Hawza education, both historically and contemporarily. For example, philosophy, at the Hawza, is based on Greek logic while history diverges very little from modernity's understanding of time. As these institutions grow and spread they shift the frame of reference, of legitimization and of knowledge forms within the Lebanese Shia community. Yet, they are shifting it to a model not too dissimilar, in both its form and its content, from that of modernity and the west. Hence, these insights reveal that the decolonial project in Islam is significantly more complex than it might first appear. Overall, as decolonial theory has not yet been put into sufficient conversation with Islam, this work demonstrates the need for cautious treading and a distinction between an Islamic decolonial project and other decolonial projects.

The second point relates to the relationship between Iran and the Shia of Lebanon. While this relationship is certainly not new, the hegemony achieved might be claimed as so (Abisaab 1994). In the field of religious education, Iran has certainly made huge efforts to reshape Islamic education since its establishment as an Islamic republic. Realizing that all but one of the Hawzas investigated are headed by graduates of the Qom seminary, in stark contrast to occurrences as recent as the nineties when all Hawza heads were graduates of Najaf, the shift is unmissable. At the level of subjects and textbooks, huge

variations toward the Qom model have also taken place. Additionally, the hegemony achieved by Sayyed Ali Khamenei's discourse stands as a striking example: his words are consistently and universally brought forth, by both students and professors, to legitimate claims, challenge the institution and denounce the old Najaf model of education. Present throughout, in those Hawzas funded and affiliated with Iran as well as those belonging to other schools, this research (re)affirms and elaborates on Iran's increasing command in Lebanon.

The third and final point concerns religion, Islam, in Lebanon's public sphere. While a *Mujtahid* issues religious (legal) opinions, with a role limited to extracting knowledge from text, it is clear, at least for my participants, that a graduate from a Hawza where the social sciences are central fields of knowledge inhabits a different space. While this is not the current reality (yet), the ripples of the calls for change are, even now, observable. If this project of change succeeds, its effects might be colossal as changing the Hawza and its curriculum is bound to alter the identity of graduates: from scriptural scholars to ones with both a broader, more critical, understanding as well as a heightened aptitude at engaging the public. In a post-modern time of media and globalization, such attributes are bound to lay the ground for scholars to exercise increased power over the Shia community. As religion and politics are deeply entwined in Lebanon, the increased sway of men of religion on the Shia populace will certainly lead to an increase in political Islam's hegemony and, by consequence, that of Hezbollah.

With an increase in numbers, and with sheikhs inhabiting dominant roles in the Shia political lifeworld, it appears that Shia men of religion in Lebanon are only headed toward an increased public and socio-political presence. Hezbollah's nomination of a sheikh for the 2018 Lebanese elections, a first, is clear evidence. Also worthy of note are the characteristics and the identity of those who choose to undergo a Hawza training: while becoming a religious scholar was, historically often by default of one being born into a 'scholarly family,' new rules are being moulded. Today, people from different backgrounds, materially and other, are entering the Hawza with various objectives: the Hawza is (already) no longer limited to graduating scholars occupied with Islamic jurisprudence. Hence, while the interviewees complained of a public perceiving them as

‘experts in everything’, and as they claimed to want their role circumscribed, if the Hawza continues the path it has begun treading the role of a Shia scholar is only headed toward an increase in both breadth and depth.

## Conclusion

An institution functioning outside Lebanon’s mainstream; observing different holidays, following a different educational model and without any coordination with any Lebanese ministry, the Hawzas of Lebanon have historically been institutions seeking to produce *Mujtahids*: religious scholars capable of issuing religious rulings. While this continues to be the case, the institution is certainly on the path of change. In this direction, many Hawzas have adopted the western academic model of set years, semesters and credits. This model has also been accompanied by multiple material modification. Interestingly, both material adjustments and structural modifications to the curriculum have been easily absorbed. Changes to content, however, have not been as smooth. As of writing this paper, the Hawza mainly offers courses in *Fikh* and *Usul*, Arabic language, logic and philosophy, Quranic studies and history. In attempts at change, some Hawzas have introduced courses in the social sciences. Yet, the standing of such subjects remains infirm, especially as they are repeatedly removed and re-introduced. Broadly speaking, the social sciences in the Hawzas of today, as an element of training, have not yet gained significant recognition, nor have they gained substantial legitimacy. Further, only theory has managed to break through. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse within the Hawza is one of change. This holds true for stakeholders, professors and students, quasi-unanimously for the latter group. Overall, between an institution manacled by its heritage, encapsulated in the yellow books and the drained methods of old, and a Hawza which is a ‘westernized university’ in Islamic dress, the ongoing transmutation is ambiguous, and the threats are huge. Yet, so is the potential.

Beyond Islamic education, this paper has raised serious questions for Lebanon: what would the changes being proposed in the Hawza mean for the future of religious scholars, to their formation, identity and role? What would the inclusion of the social sciences do to the general knowledge, the awareness, the skills and the critical thinking of these men of religion? What would such changes mean to religion and its presence in Lebanon’s

socio-political public sphere? While the answer is complex and unclear, it is certainly in the direction of greater public presence and an increase in the socio-political role of Lebanon's Shia men of religion. This has only been possible as a result of the Lebanese state's absence whereby Hawzas freely diverge and converge to form an incoherent, heterogeneous and dynamic field. A rich example of how colonialism, neo-imperialism and geopolitics intersect to produce contemporary reality; what was described is also an empirical (re)demonstration of the Iranian model's mounting hegemony in the Shia world. To close, beyond Lebanon, these findings raise serious questions and challenges to what has come to be known as decolonial theory; showcasing the complexity of an Islamic decolonial project while simultaneously demonstrating its indispensability.

---

<sup>i</sup> It should be noted that Islam has no 'clergy' which can be compared to that of Christianity.

<sup>ii</sup> Finke and Dougherty (2002) have theorized what they call 'religious capital', in building on the work of Bourdieu (1986). While this is of great relevance, there are mass differences between the context in which they worked and the context of this work. As exploring these differences is beyond the scope of this paper, such theorizations were not incorporated.

<sup>iii</sup> This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. For further information, refer to Bhambra (2007).

<sup>iv</sup> The transition from *Mujtahid* to *Marji'* is not based on a complex process which is beyond the scope of this paper. For further information refer to Walbridge (2001).

<sup>v</sup> This is based on an ethnographic observation and conversations throughout the fieldwork. While there is no literature on the issue, it is clear that a hegemony of the major Hawzas, backed by the major *Marji'*, is well-established.

<sup>vi</sup> It is to be noted that no hierarchy of credibility was assumed between students, professors and administration.

<sup>vii</sup> This information is based on interviews with the administration of Al-Rasoul Hawza cross-referencing in all six Hawzas.

<sup>viii</sup> Mainly Hezbollah, the higher Shiite council, the Amal movement, the Institutions of Sayyed Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah, among others, have acknowledged/been involved with this board.

<sup>ix</sup> A professor at Al-Montazar Hawza claimed that there are over ten Hawzas in the Bekaa region.

According to sheikh Amin Termos, a member of the board of trustees, only two meet the criteria for accreditation were found and these are the ones mentioned in the guidebook.

<sup>xxx</sup> This is a very small sum for Lebanon's living costs, in the range of 75\$ to 150\$ per month.

<sup>xi</sup> Due to the baggage which comes with terms such as 'progressive' or 'traditional' the terms 'emerging' and 'established' are being used.

<sup>xii</sup> The differences often relate to structure and added substituted courses. They are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>xiii</sup> All such lists in this paper, unless specified otherwise, were generated through the calculation, and then the ordering, of weights allocated to subjects/books.

<sup>xiv</sup> The books used to teach Arabic grammar are mostly ones written by scholars belonging to the Sunni denomination. During one of the classes attended at the Hawza, the professor stated that knowledge is to be sought after 'regardless of the personal views of he who holds it'. This came as a reaction to a student inquiring as to why they study books authored by Sunni scholars where examples and stories are sometimes contradictory to Shia beliefs, leading to a class debate on Islamic unity. The sheikh claimed that students should not view the Sunnis as 'others' (he explicitly used the term 'not to other them').

<sup>xv</sup> In the Shia communities of Lebanon, 'Sheikh' is only used to refer to a religious scholar.



---

<sup>xvi</sup> They are often students of Islamic studies or of philosophy. At the time the fieldwork was conducted, Al-Maaref university had just opened and, being directly related to Hezbollah, many students had chosen to transfer to it instead of staying at the Islamic University which is affiliated with the Amal Movement and the Higher Islamic Shiite Council in Lebanon.

<sup>xvii</sup> It was made clear, through interviews, that courses titled 'Introduction to psychology' and 'introduction to sociology', as well as other social science courses, were introduced to the Hawza a number of years back and were offered to students for somewhere between three and five years. These were later removed.

<sup>xviii</sup> Words of its general director, Sayyed Ali Hijazi.

<sup>xix</sup> This can range from five months to two years of study for a given book.

<sup>xx</sup> There is no sixth subject given weight. All other subjects are given in great briefness.

<sup>xxi</sup> See Khalaji (2006) for some information on the Najaf Hawza and the recession of its model.

<sup>xxii</sup> The theoretical foundation of such a statement comes from work done on American Seminaries. Major examples include 'Religiously Based Politics: Religious Elites and the Public' by Daniel V. A. Olson and Jackson W. Carroll. (1992)

<sup>xxiii</sup> Quotes from interviews with Hawza general directors.

<sup>xxiv</sup> These two were the general directors of Al-Imam Ali Hawza and a small Hawza in the South. This was also found among some administrative staff members at other Hawzas (all administrative staff at all Hawzas are graduates or advanced students).

## Bibliography

- Abisaab, R. J. 1994. The Ulama of Jabal 'Amil in Safavid Iran, 1501- 1736: Marginality, Migration and Social Change. *Iranian Studies*, 27(1/4), 103–122.
- Ahern, K. J. 1999. Ten Tips for Reflexive Bracketing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(3), 407–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239900900309>.
- al-Gharawi, M. 1994. *s al-Hawza al- 'ilmiyya ft al-Najaf al- ashraf {The Hawza in Najaf*. Beirut: Dâr al-adwâ'.
- Aziz, T. 2001. Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Maja'iyā. In L. S. Walbridge (Ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi`a: The Institution of the Marja` Taqlid*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berkley, J. 1992. *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education*. Princeton University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zvxj4>
- Bhambra, G. K. 2014. *Connected Sociologies*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Butt, T. M. 2012. Social and Political Role of Madrassa: Perspectives of Religious Leaders in Pakistan. *South Asian Studies*, 27(2), 387–407.
- Burawoy, M. 1998. The Extended Case Method. *Sociological Theory*, 16(1), 4–33.
- Chalabi, T. 2006. *The Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil and the New Lebanon: Community and Nation-State, 1918-1943*. Springer.
- Deeb, L. 2006. *An Enchanted Modern : Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton, N.J. ; Woodstock: Princeton, N.J. ; Woodstock : Princeton University Press.
- Dodge, B. 1962. *Muslim education in medieval times*. Washington: Middle East Institute.
- Finke, R., & Dougherty, K. D. 2002. The Effects of Professional Training: The Social and Religious Capital Acquired in Seminaries. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(1), 103–120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00104>
- Grosfoguel. 2013. The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities. *Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, (1), 73–90.
- Haskins, C. H. 1965. *The rise of universities*.
- Heywood, A. 1994. *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*. Macmillan.
- Hourani, A. 1986. From Jabal 'Āmil to Persia. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 49(1), 133–140.
- Kelly, A. V. 2004. *The curriculum : theory and practice* (Fifth). Sage Publications.

Khalaji, M. 2006. The Last Marja Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism. *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*.

Makdisi, G. 1981. *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*. Edinburgh University Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.lb/books?id=rZOwngEACAAJ>

Mervin, S. 2003. La Hawza a L'épreuve du siècle: la réforme de l'enseignement religieux supérieur chiite de 1909 a nos jours. In M. Al-Charif & S. Al-Kawakibi (Eds.), *Le courant réformiste musulman et sa réception dans les sociétés arabes* (pp. 69–84). Damas: IFPO.

Mervin, S. 2007. *Les mondes chiites et l'Iran*. Paris / Beyrouth: Karthala/IFPO.

Mignolo, W. D. (2011). Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: on (de)coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience. *Postcolonial Studies*, 14(3), 273–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2011.613105>

Miller, J. & Glassner, B. 2011. Interviews and Focus groups. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative Research*. SAGE.

Mottahedeh, R. 2016. The Najaf Hawzah Curriculum. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26, 341–351.

Nesbitt, P. 2007. Keepers of the Tradition: Religious Professionals and their Careers. In *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (pp. 295–322). 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd. Retrieved from [http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/hdbk\\_socreligion/n15.xml](http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/hdbk_socreligion/n15.xml)

Olson, D. V. A., & Carroll, J. W. 1992. Religiously Based Politics: Religious Elites and the Public. *Social Forces*, 70(3), 765–786. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579753>

Rashed, H. 2015. Towards a common ground: Arab versus Western views about challenges of Islamic religious education curriculum of the twenty-first century. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 45(6), 953–977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2014.932247>

Rasiah, A. W. 2007. *City of knowledge: The development of Shi'i religious learning with particular attention to the hawzah 'ilmiyah of Qum, Iran* (Ph.D.). University of California, Berkeley, United States -- California. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304900378>

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. 2011. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. SAGE.

Sindawi, K. 2007. Hawza Instruction and Its Role in Shaping Modern Shī'ite Identity: The Hawzas of al-Najaf and Qumm as a Case Study. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(6), 831–856.

Walbridge, L. S. 2001. Shi'ism and Authority. In *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja` Taqlid*. New York: Oxford University Press.